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THE NEGRO IN THE TRADES UNIONS IN NEW YORK

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To ascertain the exact number of colored men in organized labor in New York city is a difficult matter. No record is kept by the secretaries of the various organizations as to the nationality of the members, and the Negro's name does not designate his race, as do many of the names of our foreigners. Locals containing large numbers of Negroes sometimes know the correct figures for their colored members, but where few of the race are in a trade complete information is hard to secure. I cannot be confident, therefore, that the list which I give is entirely correct. It has, however, been compiled after months of inquiry and probably has only a small percentage of error. What error there is is likely to be one of under-, not of over-, statement.

The following is a list of Negro union men in New York city. With the exception of some of the building trades, only organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor are counted:

Asphalt workers, 320; teamsters, 300; rockdrillers and tool-sharpeners, 250; cigar makers, 121; bricklayers, 90; waiters, 90; carpenters, 60; plasterers, 45; double drum hoisters, 30; safety and portable engineers, 26; eccentric firemen, 15; letter carriers, 10; pressmen, 10; printers, 6; butchers, 3; lathers, 3; painters, 3; coopers, 2; sheet metal workers, 1; rockmen, 1. This makes a total of 1,388 men.

The census of 1900 gives the number of Negro males engaged in gainful occupations in New York city at 19,314. This population in the last five years has, I believe, from a study I have made of the Negro tenements, increased not less than 40 per cent. We then have to-day a working male population of 27,039 Negroes; 1,386 of these, a little over 5 per cent., being union men.

This is not a large number, but it shows an increase over former times, if we can trust the opinion of unionists, for there are no figures with which to make comparison. One colored laborer

says, "The number of Negroes in the unions has doubled in the last five years." "There are three times as many as there were formerly," says another. "I am confident that there are many more colored men in organized labor than there were five years ago," says the recording secretary of the Central Federated Union. These are only guesses, but from them it appears probably that the Negro has not lost but has gained in organized labor.

Are the Negroes in feeble unions or in powerful bodies? For the most part they are in unions of the latter character. The engineers and firemen are old and strong organizations; so are the bricklayers, who in New York get seventy cents an hour for an eight hour day. The rock drillers were able to hold their price with their employers during the whole of the building of the subway. The carpenters, though a divided body, command four dollars a day. The cigar makers are an old union. The asphalt workers are a well organized body and able to enforce their demands. The Negroes, therefore, seem to be in strong labor groups.

How do they serve in these organizations? The answer is in their favor. The official of the teamsters writes that they are satisfactory and rarely scab on them. The cigar makers say "satisfactory." A number of locals report "as good as the average." Their record in New York is creditable. One union owes its large membership and its strong organization to a colored man. The asphalt workers have for their agent, or walking delegate, Mr. James L. Wallace, a Negro from Virginia, who helped to organize his union and has worked for it with much ability. Mr. Wallace has increased the membership from 250 in 1903, when he assumed control of it, to 850 in 1906. The colored men of this union constitute a little over a third of the members, the other workers being chiefly Italians. Wages have been advanced twice since Mr. Wallace has been at the head of his local, for he has acted as its president as well as delegate, and his men now make two dollars and a half as rollers working ten hours a day, and four dollars as wood-pavers working eight hours a day, an increase in the last three years from forty-three to sixty-eight cents a day. Mr. Wallace is his local's representative at the Central Federated Union, and is spoken of by its best workers as a man of intelligence and discretion.

But while we find the proportion of union Negroes in strong organizations gratifying, we also see that there are numerous

omissions, and that colored men are in few skilled trades. There are no machinists, no structural iron workers, no plumbers, no garment makers. I find 102 different trades, or divisions of trades, on the list of the Central Federated Union which, as far as I have been able to ascertain, have no Negroes in their membership. Why is this the case? In the first place, compared with other races, there are not many Negroes in New York, and few of those that are here are skilled workmen. There are, moreover, tens of thousands of foreigners and of American-born white men who come here to get employment. The city gathers in multitudes of workers, and, while labor is always in demand, many artisans have to turn to unskilled tasks. When the few Negroes who are skilled enter this labor market, they compete with the best of the world. The struggle is severe, and they with others feel it. Then the trades union, endeavoring to maintain a high standard of living for its members, may decide for a time to adopt a policy of restriction of membership. Excessive entrance dues will be charged, or friends of the men inside the organization will be given the first chance at admission. All of the city's new comers are likely to be subjected to this policy; the Jew, who is now in nearly every union in New York, has suffered, and still suffers from it; the Italian feels it; but it is upon the Negro that it bears hardest. He is not sufficiently strong in numbers to be a menace unorganized, and he finds himself pushed aside while another man is admitted to the place he hoped might be his.

This discrimination is primarily economic, not racial; but it is hard to determine where economic motive ends and race or caste discrimination begins. Undoubtedly men are debarred from unions in New York solely because of their color. This is contrary to the ideals of organized labor, to the constitution of the American Federation, and I believe to the sense of the best men in the movement in New York. "No man shall be debarred because of his creed or color," unionists say again and again; and they rarely go against this principle openly as did the locomotive engineers when they denied their democracy and put the word "white" in their constitution. But the admission of a member is usually left to the local to which he applies, and there are various means by which a colored man may be refused admittance.

I have been unable to determine how many Negroes in a given

time have been denied membership to organizations in New York because of their color; for it is difficult not only to learn of those refused admittance, but also to ascertain the real cause when a man does not get in. Sometimes he is discouraged at the outset and hardly tries; again he is debarred because he applies at an inopportune time. I have recently had experience in attempting to get a carpenter into a certain local. At the date I asked a man to vouch for him the local was taking in no men, black or white; they had shut down on admitting members for a few months. The colored carpenter in question, had he applied alone, might have believed that this answer was intended especially for him, and would have made no further effort to get inside the organization, whereas I have every reason to hope that when the restriction is removed he will be elected to membership. Our Negro population comes to us chiefly from the Southern States, and it has been taught that labor organization is its enemy. It is timid, too, in attempting to gain its rights. Colored men have heard that white men lay down their tools rather than work with them, and they sometimes give up their trade without a trial. Still, there are Negroes of skill and persistence who have been denied admittance to the union, and who have suffered because of this.

Would the Negro as a workman be better off, then, if there were no labor unions? I have heard colored men prominent in industrial school work say that they would be; yet it is difficult to conceive of the American laborer to-day without the benefits that have accrued and are accruing to him from the collective bargaining and from the protective legislation that organized labor has often obtained. Whether in or out of the union, the Negro has benefited by this; but if labor organization creates race discrimination, then it deserves the condemnation of the colored race. It is spoken of sometimes as doing this, but the accusation is not true. It has found caste feeling and has at times been unable to overcome it, but it has not created it. If it had, we should have seen the negro strongest in those pursuits which were unorganized; yet many occupations are closed to him because of the prejudice of white employees who have never formed a union. There are to-day numbers of negroes coming to us from the West Indies who have been trained as clerks and accountants, but you will find them in New York acting as elevator boys in the halls of the business houses

whose offices they never enter. If organization made race prejudice, we should find it lacking among the women whose unions are too young to be accounted of much strength; but for years white working girls have been cruel in their refusal to admit their colored sisters to the right to work in factory or shop. Nothing in New York so holds the Negro race from moral and industrial progress as the denial to its women of the varied opportunities of labor. The banding together of men of one class and of a common interest may occasionally emphasize race discrimination, but it does not bring it into existence. And as the working man grows to see with increasing clearness that he needs all competent labor within his organization, the Negro when he is efficient will find the union discouraging the individual who allows his caste sentiments to interfere with this movement for unification. The far-sighted leaders of the labor world understand this. They strive to stamp out class feeling, not to cultivate it. Appreciating the danger of an exploited class of workmen in America, they endeavor, though not always successfully, to obliterate race lines in the organizations of the country.

But if organized labor does not create race discrimination, there is a sufficient amount of it in America to make the Negro often occupy the position of a strike-breaker. We have seen this at times in New York. When men are wanted in large numbers for comparatively unskilled work, they will be sent for from the South, as was the case with a strike of longshoremen in Brooklyn, and as was conspicuously the situation in Chicago during the teamsters' strike last summer. Some of the Negroes who come to the North do not know what the conditions are, others understand fully what they are doing; but, innocent or comprehending, they are equally hated by the men whose places they take. They have also been indiscriminately praised by the Negro world. At the National Negro Business League, held in New York last August, one of the speakers gave great glory to the Negro strike-breakers in Chicago. I do not think he said this because he was an individualist and believed every strike-breaker to be a hero; it was rather because he felt that the colored man had been imposed upon and was vindicating his rights. While this is sometimes so, it is not always the case.

Negro strike-breakers are of many kinds, and they should be

considered in relation to their immediate labor problem as we should consider any other men. There are colored men who cannot get into the union in their own city, and when a strike occurs, after having been denied the right to work under union conditions in their own trade, take the places of the striking men. In doing this they are justified. Then there are the Negroes who, coming from another State, take the jobs of unionists who have refused colored men admittance into the locals of their city. Such men, if they had work at home, are in a questionable position when they interfere with an effort on the part of the laboring class to better its condition. Their justification would be that the men of their color had not been fairly treated by the striking union. And, lastly, there are the men who take the place of strikers in a trade in which the Negro has had union rights. This, as I understand, was the status of the colored strike-breakers who took the positions of teamsters in Chicago last summer. The teamsters' union had been open to colored men, and they had no grievance against it. The Negroes who came to the city from the South and worked as teamsters were strike-breakers, and no more to be commended than the white men who did the same thing, though their bravery was doubtless greater. When Negroes, without discrimination, publicly applaud the strike-breakers of their race, they are taking a stand that they should seriously consider, since they separate themselves from the ethics of the greater part of the labor world.

In the printers' strike in New York to-day the situation has been an interesting one. Until a few weeks ago there was but one colored man in Typographical Union No. 6; it was generally known that Negroes could not get into this union. Since the strike colored men trained in an industrial school have taken the place of unionists in a prominent New York firm. This was the only chance these men had to get into printing in New York, or seemed so; but I more admire the five colored printers who went about the city pretending to look for work in a non-union shop. They did not mean to take it, but their ruse was successful; they were met by a union picket, invited to join the organization, and are now on strike pay.

I feel the need of emphasizing the Negro's entering into organized labor when it is possible and keeping upon good terms with white laborers, because I regard with some fear the counter teach-

ing which the race now so often hears, that it must win its way alone, as a segregated people. That this is possible in New York I do not believe. The colored man has neither the skill nor the numbers to maintain himself as a worker in a segregated group. We can see this in the pursuits which he has lost. At one time he had almost a monopoly of the barbering business; now he rarely keeps a shop, except where he works for his own race. As a waiter he has fast lost ground, for no first-class hotels employ him, and but few good restaurants. He cannot keep a monopoly of a trade so long as he is thought of as a worker who must always be with his kind, his own people. A man who is hiring laborers wants the greatest efficiency he can get, and he will not choose to employ men from a race that works only in race groups and at the same time constitutes but 2 per cent. of the city's population. Take the case of the waiters, for instance. There are, or were, according to the last census, 30,104 white waiters in Greater New York, and 6,078 colored. In an employer must choose either white or colored, will he not be sure to find more efficiency in the group that contained 30,000 men than in the group one-fifth as large? The smaller group will have able men in it, but they will be held back by their inefficient co-laborers. The only place in the world of labor that the colored man can win as a segregated race in New York is the place that no one else wants. He may sweep down the subway steps, run the elevators in cheap apartment houses, act as porter in stores, where the work is heavy and the pay small; but when he ceases to be segregated and enters the organized trades, he is on an equal footing with other laborers, he gets their pay and their hours, and he is a man in a movement of workingmen. How to get to this place should be his constant question. He should grow increasingly efficient and should pound at the union's door, breaking it down if he is refused admittance, but after he is within doing his best to be of service to his fellow-workers. He should learn to count on the improvement of his condition through the working class. Having so long been associated with various forms of domestic service, the colored man has laid too much stress upon what his employer might do for him. There is the occasional employer who takes a black man because he believes he should have a chance, and keeps him despite the prejudice of his other employees, but such a man is rare. "I have no objection to hiring you," is the

usual remark addressed to the Negro who looks for employment, "but my clerks would not care to work with you." A little firmness would perhaps overcome the clerks' opposition, but there are plenty of cheap white clerks; and if the black man should by chance get such a position, he would probably receive a lower wage than the white man next him.

As the Negro gains in productive efficiency he will become increasingly important to the world of organized labor. Education will raise his standard of living, and he will give his support to the effort to gain proper human conditions for all who work. It is only through the solidarity of labor's interests that he can hope to be saved from remaining in an exploited class. Every colored man in New York who stands with the organization, working for it in its defeat or its success, gains respect not only for himself but for his race. He comes in contact with men of his own class, and in the best way that such contact can come about, as a workman by the side of another workman. Caste lines disappear when men are held together by a common interest, and as they feel their dependence one upon another they gain in sympathy and in fraternal spirit.

I heard a story the other day, whose every word I can vouch for, which illustrates better than anything else I can say the thought which I have tried to express.

An Irish friend was talking on trade union matters, and she said: "Do you know, yisterday I dined wid a nayger. Little did I iver think I wud do sich a thing, but it was this way. You know my man is scretary of his union, and the min are on strike, and who should come to the door at twelve o'clock but a big black nayger. 'Is Brother O'Neill at home?' says he. 'Brother O'Neill,' thinks I; 'well, if I'm brother to you I'd better have stayed in Ireland.' But I axed him in, and in a minute my man comes and he shakes the nayger by the hand, and says he, 'You must stay and ate wid us.' So I puts the dinner on the table and I sat down and ate wid a nayger. 'Well,' I said, 'how did he seem?' 'To tell you the truth,' she said, 'he seemed just like anybody else.'"